

**“Reflections on Thomas Berry”
By John Grim**

**Thomas Berry Memorial
September 26th, 2009
Cathedral of St John the Divine**

Rather than one image of Thomas, I hear his laughter. That sound activates images from our first meeting in 1968 all the way to the week before he went, as the Crow Indians say, to the “other-side camp.” When I met Thomas, I was unsure how to name him because he was a “fatherly priest,” a “doctorly academic,” and a “mister” to whose discipline I was submitting myself. No problem, as I found out, he simply said: “Call me whatever you want.” This was not a teacherly trick to bring me to my own voice - well, it was that too - but more important to me, it was an opening to friendship.

Like so many of you here, Thomas was my friend and friendship was a deep realization, a deep teaching in Thomas’ understanding in which one encountered authenticity in oneself by encountering the Other. Now, one great teacher in a French lineage [Levinas] remarked that: “We are all held hostage by the Other” -- that is a powerful insight into interdependence with reality. Thomas’ insight into friendship with another, however, arose out of his reflections on “authenticity,” or *cheng*, in Chinese thought and especially Confucianism.

I dare not wander too deeply into that tradition with such auspicious scholars of Confucianism among us, but I believe Thomas set before me that day an opportunity to see something of myself. Something I yearned to show him, to show you. That is, friendship which acknowledges difference. Not hierarchies of differences that are restrictively vertical and increasingly elite,

but ones that are ever-expansive in maturity and reaching-out in compassion. Not differences generated from self-interest and fact learning, but differences that flow from our cosmological emergence - the stillness abiding at the heart of reality. This is a teaching Thomas could transmit with a laugh.

With all of you who knew Thomas, then, I narrate story. A different story, yet, our story, and they all evoke a meeting with this remarkable man. Such a story might recall his laughter when he told of having left a book manuscript in a taxi when he arrived early in his journey here in New York. Standing utterly perplexed on the street corner wondering what to do, he tells of the taxi having made its way around the block returning to him, returning his hand-typed work. And he laughed with the delightful return of it all.

My favorite story is one I usually take some time to tell, stretching it out so that all its delicate memories of emotions, sites, smells, and sensitivities ripple over the telling like a stream on rocks. The short version will do today: I was writing a dissertation, it was the first week of the golden year in 1977-78 when I lived at the Riverdale Center of Religious Research with Thomas, Brian Brown, Valerio Ortolani and others. I was in that morbid state only dissertation writers can fathom – utterly lost for words and incapable of silence on almost any subject.

I had gone into the woods next to the Center where some pheasants lived and their smell was a comfort to a Dakotan transplanted to the Bronx. I came back and set to repairing a leather couch in the Sunroom using some lingering talents from a former summer's work. When Thomas came in, he sized up the situation immediately. He laughed and asked me what I was doing. Mumbling, I nodded towards my stitching. He sat down in a chair nearby and, as if talking to no one in particular, reflected on Dante's leave-taking from Virgil in the Purgatory section of the Divine Comedy. "It was so

difficult for Dante to contemplate leaving his guide, Virgil. He was crestfallen, and Virgil called to him: “Lift up your beard! Crown and mitre yourself over yourself!” I looked up and we laughed together.

At the end, Thomas’ thought contracted and he kept a mnemonic device – a sheet on Western/Christian History – to activate his powers of recall and story. Yet, sometimes no device was necessary and that old laughter blanketed his cold shoulders and he played with its corners like a youngster feeling secure in changing realities. So it was when we visited him in his room in Greensboro, North Carolina. “How are you! Fr. Thomas,” we would inquire; and he would smilingly respond, “Halfway.” “Halfway?” we wondered. “Halfway to paradise,” he laughed.

Or again, “How are you Thomas?” and he tilted his head to say, “Not as well as I’d like, but better than I deserve.” He’d laugh with his trick. Or again, and this is the response I hear today. ”How are you Thomas?” And he looked up so whimsically saying: “You know in China, they say that age brings wisdom: I just don’t know what happened to me!” May your laughter rain down on us like Dharma, may your laughter be a beacon call of authenticity, may your laughter crown and mitre us over ourselves once again. [a call setting up the Winter Dance tree]